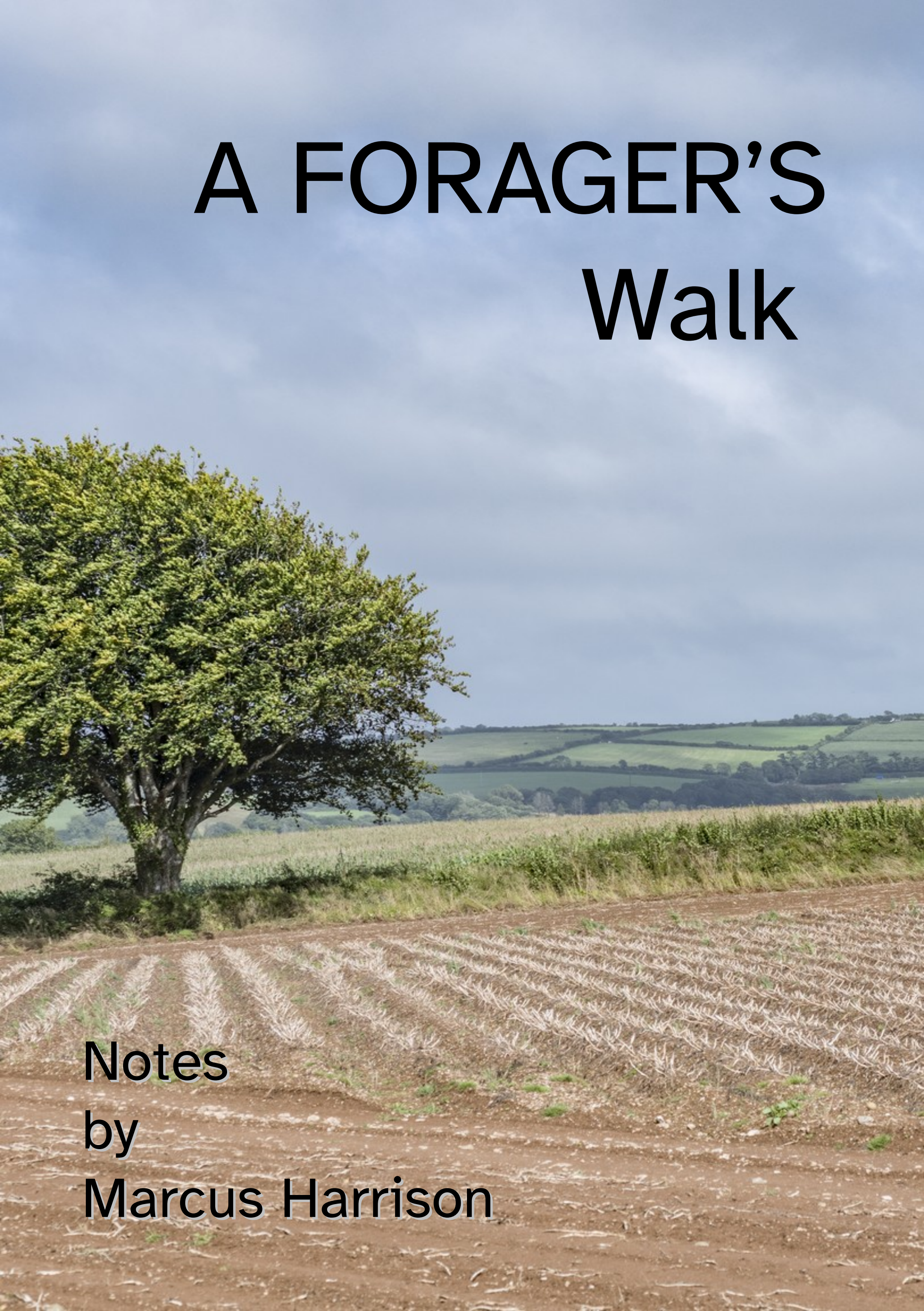


A FORAGER'S Walk

Notes
by
Marcus Harrison

When I used to run my long-distance foraging and edible wild plant identification walks I would provide a small binder with the following aide-memoire pages included. These provided an image and key points about a variety of plants we found during the route of the walk through various and differing terrains / habitats. For ease I have added a sort of contents page list after this introduction.

There were plenty of other edible plant species covered on those walks too, but the aide-memoire species were the ones I believed were most useful to the participants, and most easily recognizable. One of the snags with plant ID for anyone new to foraging (or plant spotting generally) is that the sheer number of plants, their differing shapes, smells and sizes, can be overwhelming... like drowning in an ocean of green as I like to put it. So the aide-memoire was to concentrate the mind and memory on a more limited, though quite extensive, range of plants.

In relation to this vast number of wild edibles I have always suggested to my guests they can help break down the overwhelming ID barrier by pigeonholing or compartmentalizing plant species... Break the year into 3 or 4 seasons, and then your foraging neighbourhood into the habitats found there (fields, woodlands, riverine / marsh, upland or rocky, coastal, etc.). Select ONE good species that you like for a particular habitat, and is found during one of the seasons. If you take the 5 habitats I've listed above and can identify one plant for 3 or 4 seasons, you have already got up to 15 to 20 edible plant species covered off. In the following years you will add others here and there. Soon you will be a seasoned forager able to step out into virtually any environment at any time of year and find something to eat. In my view the master forager is someone who is completely unphased by the time of year or habitat locality, and will mostly find something to eat despite being played a bad hand - as it were. It's rather like you having the knowledge upstate to take control of the environment, rather than the environment controlling you. Inevitably the environment will be doing so, but you will have sufficient knowledge to seek out likely potential good plant-hunting spots in an otherwise bad zone, or the knowledge to know when to move on to a more productive foraging area and not waste your time and effort hunting for a food source that is simply not there.

Have fun!

Species Covered…

ALEXANDERS - Smyrnium olusatrum

ANGELICA, WILD - Angelica sylvestris

BEECH - Fagus sylvatica

BILBERRY / WHORTLEBERRY - Vaccinium myrtillus

BLACKTHORN / SLOE - Prunus spinosa

BROOKLIME - Veronica beccabunga

BROOM - Cytisus scoparius

GREATER BURDOCK - Arctium lappa

CLEAVERS / GOOSEGRASS - Galium aparine

COLUMBINE - Aquilegia vulgaris

DANDELION - Taraxacum officinale

DOCK, BROAD-LEAVED - Rumex obtusifolius

DOG ROSE - Rosa canina

COMMON ELDER - Sambucus nigra

GORSE / FURZE - Ulex europaeus

GROUND IVY - Glechoma hederacea

HAWTHORN - Crataegus oxyacantha syn. C. rhipidophylla

HEDGE GARLIC / GARLIC MUSTARD - Alliaria petiolata

HART’S-TONGUE FERN - Asplenium scolopendrium

HOGWEED - Heracleum sphondylium

IVY-LEAVED TOADFLAX - Cymbalaria muralis syn. Linaria cymbalaria

LADY'S SMOCK - Cardamine pratensis

LESSER CELANDINE - Ficaria verna syn. Ranunculus ficaria

COMMON MALLOW - Malva sylvestris

MARSH MALLOW - Althaea officinalis

MEADOWSWEET - Filipendula ulmaria

NAVELWORT / PENNYWORT - Umbilicus rupestris

COMMON STINGING NETTLE - Urtica dioica

OPPOSITE-LEAVED GOLDEN SAXIFRAGE - Chrysosplenium oppositifolium

ORACHE - Atriplex patula

PIGNUT - Bunium bulbocastanum

PLANTAIN, GREATER - Plantago major

PLANTAIN, RIBWORT - Plantago lanceolata

PRIMROSE - Primula vulgaris

RAMSONS - Allium ursinum

ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB - Chamerion angustifolium

SCURVY-GRASS - Cochlearia officinalis

SELF-HEAL - Prunella vulgaris

SILVERWEED - Potentilla anserina

SORREL, COMMON - Rumex acetosa

SORREL, WOOD - Oxalis acetosella

WILD STRAWBERRY - Fragaria vesca

THISTLE, FIELD / CREEPING - Cirsium arvense

THISTLE, MARSH - Cirsium palustre

THISTLE, SPEAR - Cirsium vulgare

VIOLET, DOG - Viola riviniana

WHITE DEAD-NETTLE - Lamium album

WOOD AVENS - Geum urbanum

YARROW - Achillea millefolium

These species are largely found across northern temperate Europe, so this guide should be useful to our English-speaking friends over on the Continent.

SAFETY & SUSTAINABILITY

THE GOLDEN RULE…

If you cannot identify a wild plant with 100% certainty as being one of the edible species NEVER use it as food. If you have the slightest hesitation over a plant's identity be safe and MOVE ON.

MOST IMPORTANT…

Check your personal tolerance to ANY new edible wild plant before consuming in quantity. Use the step-by-step check discussed on your WFS course. If you have a medical condition or are taking medication then you should seek professional medical advice before consuming edible wild plants as they may contain constituents that impair or amplify that medication.

AND DO…

Be 'aware' of the environment that you are gathering from (is it an old industrial area with possible soil contaminants, is there possible modern contamination from effluent, car exhaust emissions, or agricultural sprays, animals and dogs etc. ?)

LASTLY…

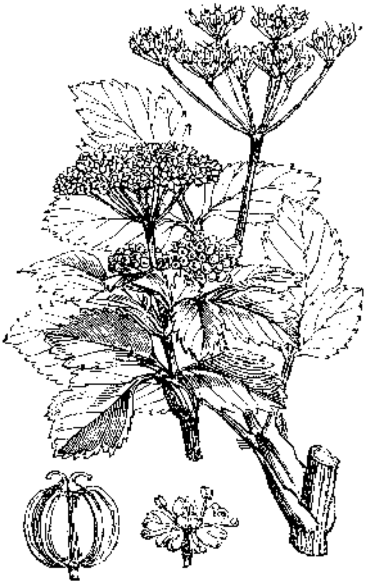
NEVER consume dead or dying foliage, or that which is discoloured. Although the plant COULD be just discoloured from bad soil nutrients it could also be an indicator of herbicides or other chemicals at work.

SUSTAINABILITY

It is important to take into consideration the types of life-cycle when harvesting wild plants for food. Plants variously have a one year (annual), two year (biennial) or perennial (3+ years) life cycle in which they produce foliage, flower, seed, and then die. If you interrupt the life-cycle - by not letting a species produce seeds - then you can destroy the plant colony and the food resource that you were enjoying.

So, in the case of annuals and biennials, always leave some plants untouched so they can to go seed and provide you with food in the future. In the case of perennials, don’t over-pick the foliage and just take a few leaves from the plants you harvest from. Over-picking can kill off perennial root-stock plants. Leaving some leaves helps the plant continue photosynthesize and rebuild the root-stock.

ALEXANDERS - *Smyrnium olusatrum*

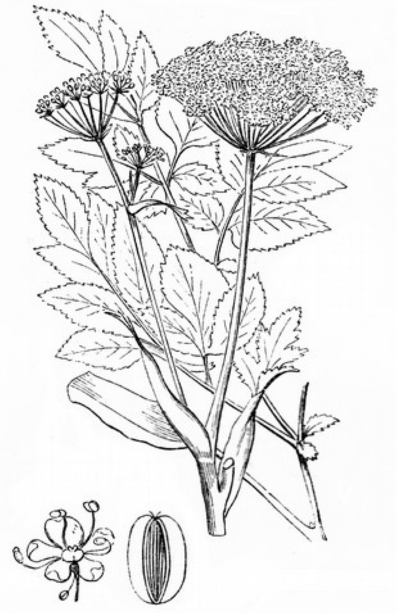


This biennial member of the *Umbellifer* family (same as hogweed and poisonous hemlock, but also carrot and parsley) has a natural preference for habitats near coastal areas, and in some localities is prolific.

Growing anything from 3 to 5 or 6ft in height (the latter from personal experience once) this plant has a round, furrowed, but smooth stem which is almost bright green as are the young leaves (older leaves become darker). Base leaves emerging from the root-stock are large and 3-4 ternate while those on the 2nd year flower stem are trifoliate, stalked, and coarsely toothed. Individually the yellow-green flowers which appear from April to June are rather non-descript but become more noticeable in their dense clustered umbel form. The flowers give rise to quite large, aromatic, seeds which are black when fully ripened, being yellow-green when young.

This species is a very old vegetable green. All parts of the plant may be used at one time or other during the two year life-cycle, though the plant is highly aromatic and not to everyone's liking.

ANGELICA, WILD - *Angelica sylvestris*



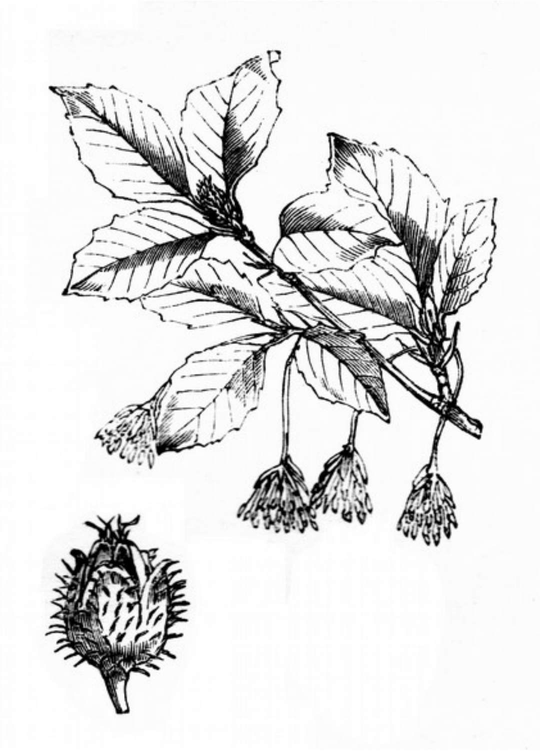
This plant is the wild version of angelica grown in gardens. It likes moist, damp, ground and so you can expect to find it in low-lying ground near rivers, streams and marshes, particularly where there is shade - though experience shows that some individual specimens can be found out in the open. In these instances the colour of the plant is generally very claret-coloured, while that in shade is more green.

Angelica is one of the *Umbellifer* family (which contains poisonous hemlock), and so it is vital the plant is identified correctly. If in doubt about any member of this family of plants leave it well alone.

Perennial angelica is a tall upright plant (about 2 to 4ft high) with a generally hairless hollow stem, and two or three pinnate, equal, leaflets comprising ovate-oblong toothed lobes.

To a certain extent wild angelica doesn't really provide anything useful as a kitchen ingredient as it is a rather coarse plant and more of a curiosity.

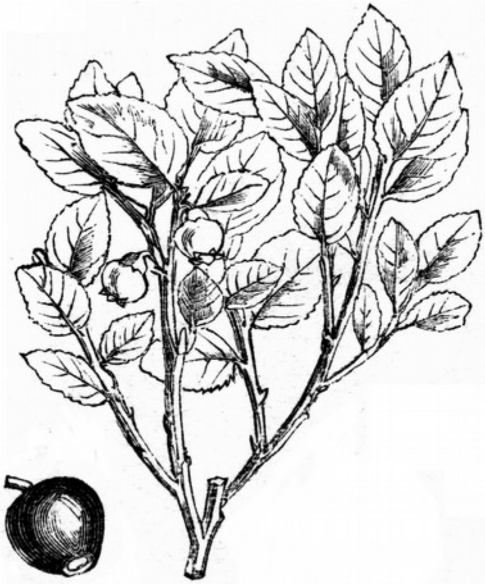
BEECH - *Fagus sylvatica*



This is a woodland tree particularly of chalk and limestone areas, but is also found in hedgerows and along roadsides, and can reach 40 to 60 ft in height, sometimes higher.

Characteristically beech canopy is very dense and lets little light reach the ground. Consequently the ground flora beneath a beech tree or trees is pretty sparse and is of little use to the forager. On the other hand beech produces nuts (technically a 'mast') which is quite tasty, although they are fiddly to shell and prepare. The very tender young Spring leaves can also be used as a salad ingredient, and added to a sandwich or two as a bit of greenery, but the young leaves need to be used within a few days of unfolding, otherwise they are chewy and awful.

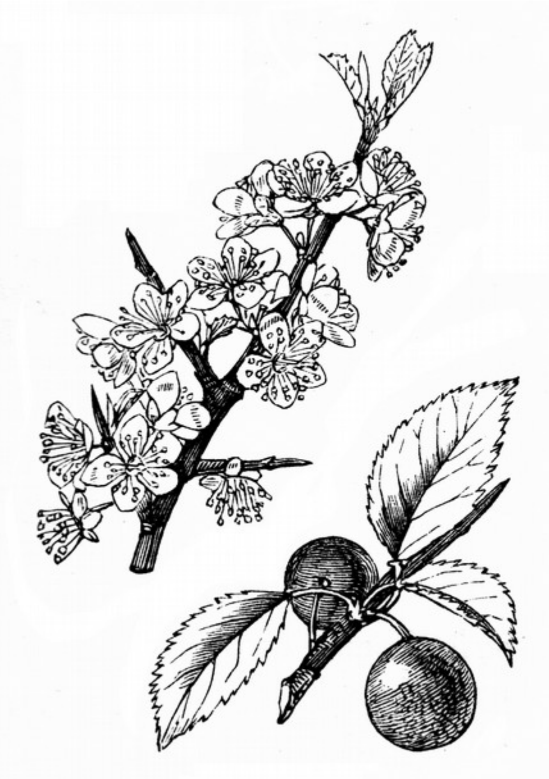
BILBERRY / WHORTLEBERRY - *Vaccinium myrtillus*



The bilberry is a typical heath plant, growing as a rule in upland areas, particularly in areas where there is heather. But this isn't always the case. Hillsides, woods, and copses are similar habitats for this plant, which loves peaty soils rich in humus, like that of a wood or heath.

Bilberry is a short, shrubby, plant growing to about 18 inches high, with the smooth, rigid, green stem at first prostrate then ascending, and having coarsely toothed, egg-shaped leaves. The waxy drooping flowers - which appear from about April to June - are a pinkish colour give rise to blue-black berry, frequently covered in a bluish bloom when ripe. It is these edible berries for which the plant is best known - generally made into pies, conserves and jellies. Be prepared for a purple-blue stained tongue.

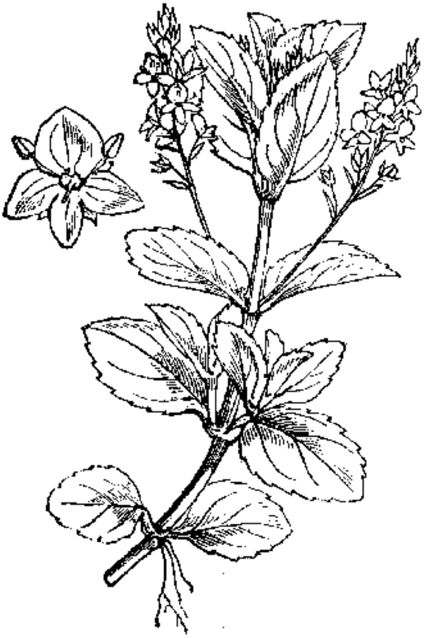
BLACKTHORN / SLOE - *Prunus spinosa*



This doesn't really qualify as an 'edible', more as a species useful for flavouring gin and making a fruit conserve. Unlike hawthorn the white flowers of blackthorn appear before the leaves.

It is a common wayside shrub or bushy tree reaching about 15ft in height. Frequently clumps of blackthorn grow together in a colony. It will be found in a variety of soils which - sandy, calcerous and humus.

BROOKLIME - *Veronica beccabunga*

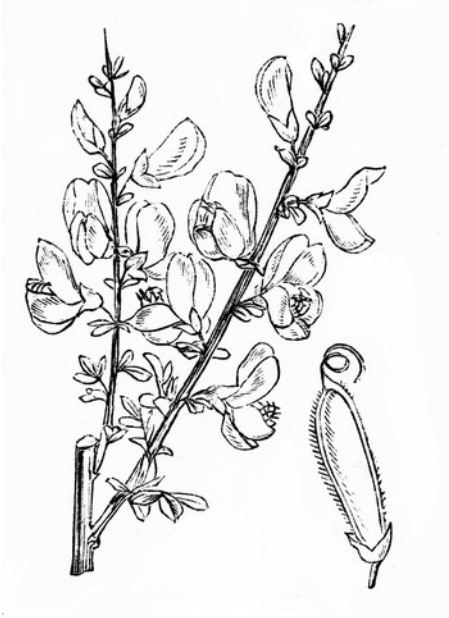


Perennial brooklime is found in all parts of Britain, and is a common aquatic species which generally grows in a submerged state in brooks, rivers, ponds, lakes and similar, but can also be found in silty wet soils and mud. You might also find it growing alongside or near watercress and opposite-leaved golden saxifrage which similarly like moist habitats. For safety I would cook the leaves of all these species rather than eat them raw – unless the water source can be guaranteed 100% pure and uncontaminated by anything.

The prostrate, slightly reddish, stems of brooklime generally develop new roots where the leaf joints where they touch the water or moisture (similar to watercress in that respect). The oval-round, stalked, leaves are hairless, quite fleshy and sometimes slightly serrated. Generally the plant grows about 1ft high, but can be larger.

The tiny blue flowers, with a white centre, are borne on stalked spikes at the base of the upper leaves, and usually flower from around May to September.

BROOM - *Cytisus scoparius*

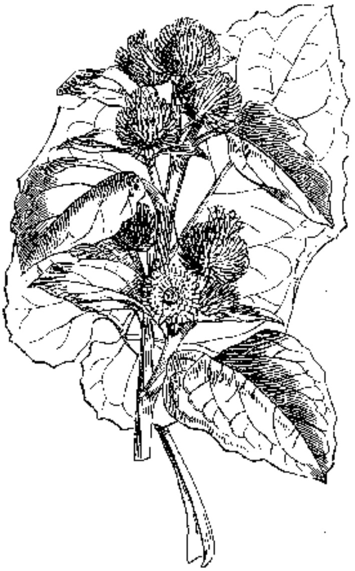


Broom is a sign of heath-type land habitat and has a shrub habit. This perennial plant is more or less hairy, the dark and bright green stems being erect, much branched, but absent of the leaf spines common to gorse. The species likes a sandy soil, or sandy-humus soil when it might be found in open woodland.

Growing to about 6ft high, the large, bright yellow, flowers of broom appear between April and June and, like gorse, it belongs to the pea family.

Broom does not have much of a use as a wild food item though in the past the flower buds were pickled as a salad ingredient. But then folks in the old days often pickled greens of all sorts as it was an important aspect of preserving food for use during the winter months when almost nothing edible grew.

GREATER BURDOCK - *Arctium lappa*



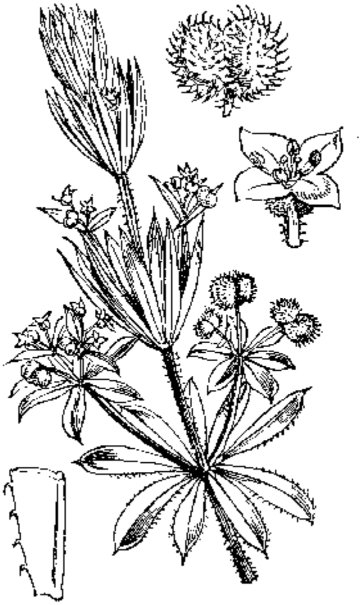
The greater burdock is a stout, erect biennial plant with branching stems, and stands from about 3 to 5ft high – seemingly dependent of habitat conditions.

The lower leaves are kidney to heart-shaped and may reach 18 to 20 inches in length and about 12 inches wide. The upper stem leaves are more oval and much smaller – to about 5 or 6 inches long. Common to all leaves is that the upper side is green while the underside is a silvery green and sometimes cottony or downy.

Greater burdock is a species of waste places, field borders and roadsides, and its large leaf spread (certainly the lower base leaves) tend to crowd out more tender and fragile plant species.

The first year root (end of Year 1) may be used as food, having a bamboo shoot-like crunch cellular quality when simmered. Young leaf stalks of first year plants are also reasonable once stripped of the fibres. Best, however, is the inner pith of young, second year, flower stalks.

CLEAVERS / GOOSEGRASS - *Galium aparine*

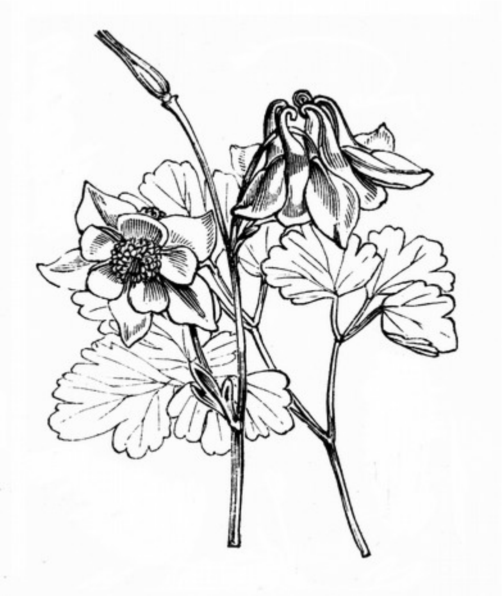


An annual weed of hedgerows and forgotten or neglected corners of fields cleavers is found across Britain and most of northern temperate areas, and favours sandy or sandy-loam soils, but also in clayey-soils.

Individual cleavers specimens can grow to about 4ft long, and have recurved (backwards facing) hairs that help it climb and also in the distribution of the spherical seeds. The stem is square with a central pith and at each corner has a finer supporting fibre. Having 6 to 8 lance-shaped leaves organized round the stems in whorls (ie. encircling). The tiny non-descript white flowers which appear around May to August give rise to bristly seeds which stick to animal fur and clothing.

The very young seedlings make a quite reasonable cooked vegetable green (used in soups, broths and the like, or mashed up) but quickly develop those fibres that no end of cooking will make palatable. Generally I would regard this as an emergency ‘green’ rather than an ingredient of choice.

COLUMBINE - *Aquilegia vulgaris*

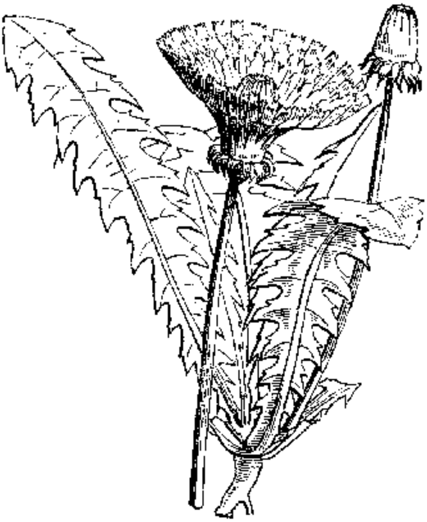


Columbine is found in open woodland, shaded hedgerows and coppices where there is reasonable drainage, while domesticated versions are cultivated in gardens.

The true columbine stands to about 2ft. (sometimes more) tall and has large, dropping, blue-purple (occasionally white), 5-petalled, stalked flowers. Each of the flowers forms a hollow-spur or horn-shaped cavity which gives rise to the Latin name for the plant *Aquilegia* or eagle; the spur said to be like an eagle's claw.

The lower leaves are on long stalks, and generally divided into three lobes, are hairless, and have a bluish-green tint. It is the young leaves which may be cooked and eaten; though perhaps for safety is best mixed among other leaves rather than as a main vegetable item as *Aquilegia* has never really been on the forager's main edibles plant list.

DANDELION - *Taraxacum officinale*



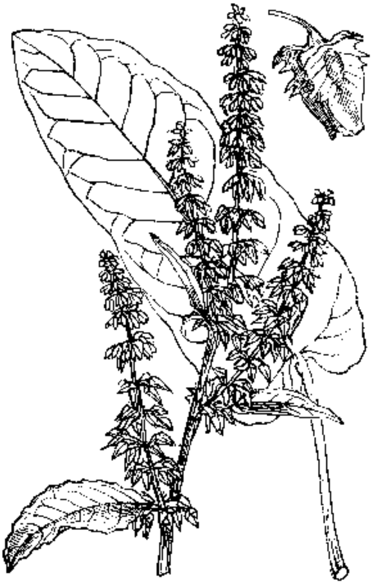
Dandelion is a native of Britain, and is perhaps too well-known to go into long technical descriptions. It is widespread throughout Britain, and it and its many variants are to be found across most of the world.

Perennial dandelion can be found growing for a large part of the year with variants preferring dry or moist soils as the habitat dictates, and also found near human habitation and waste ground. So it's a plant that you will find on sandy, clayey and sometimes even loamy soils.

The plant has a rosette habit, and generally has smooth or hairless leaves, although sometimes a slight cottony variation occurs. In unfavourable conditions the plant may only grow a few inches high, but in good conditions tit can be around 8 to 10. The root is long, stout (when older), light brown in colour and has a milky sap (as do the leaves and flower stalks). The leaves are bright green, all arising from the root crown, are entire or deeply divided - sometimes nearly to the base. Golden yellow flowers are borne on single hollow, round, erect stalks, the flowers appearing from March / April to around October.

The roots are used as a coffee substitute and the leaves may be eaten in salads (if young) or cooked. Bitterness is easily processed out before consuming.

DOCK, BROAD-LEAVED - *Rumex obtusifolius*



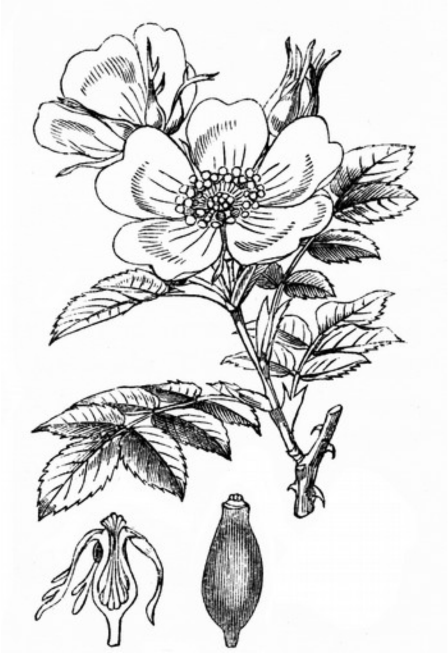
Occurring in all parts of Britain and across northern temperate Europe the long-rooted, perennial, broad-leaved dock is the plant species that is associated with rubbing on nettle stings. It is one of the troublesome weeds of agriculture, and can be found in both clayey and peaty soils.

Standing generally 1 to 2ft high when mature the broad, stalked, base leaves of this plant are oblong and veined, while the upper stem leaves are more oblong-lance-shaped. The flowers are insignificant and not showy, but produce a mass of seeds that characteristically turn a rust-red when they mature.

The very youngest leaves can be boiled and eaten (throw away the bitter cooking water), but as the plant matures it develops an overwhelming bitterness that doesn't make dock pleasant eating, and more of a 'survival' food.

On the other hand young leaves of the Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*) are far more palatable. Older leaves of this plant have curled edges as the name implies.

DOG ROSE - *Rosa canina*



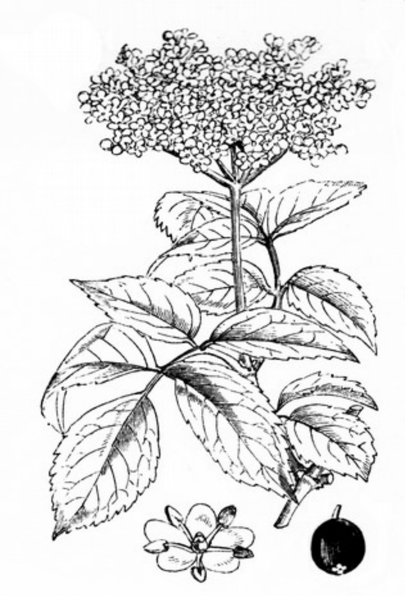
This prickly, climbing, species grows throughout much of Britain and is one of a number of wild roses which all give rise to a 'hip' later in the year. It likes a humus or sandy-loam soil. The other more useful rose growing wild in the UK in coastal areas is *Rosa rugosa* which has cherry tomato-size rosehips.

A shrub, *Rosa canina* puts forth green or purple stems with curved-back prickles which both help to protect it but also to climb (it can grow 8 to 10ft high). Dog rose has rigid, hairless, leaflets which are simply serrated and the ovate leaves arranged on either side of a stalk, the upper side of each leaf being shiny.

The conspicuous, pinkish-white, flowers appear around June-July and are borne on stalks off the main climbing stem. Pleasantly scented.

Fruits used for making rosehip syrup, conserves or preserves, and even pulped to make a sweet tasting sauce (especially in the case of *Rosa rugosa*).

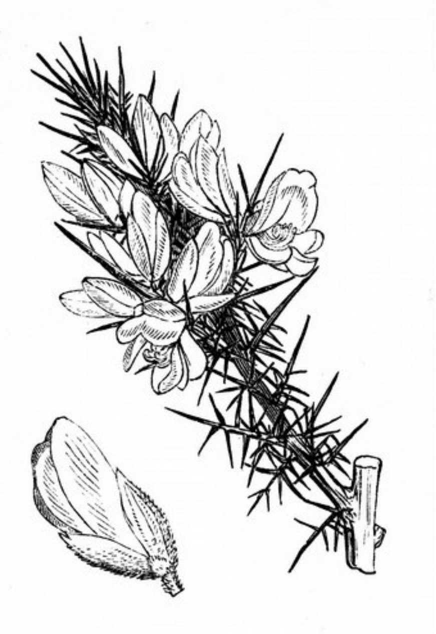
COMMON ELDER - *Sambucus nigra*



Common elder is found throughout most of Britain, being a deciduous shrub or tree that frequents hedgerows, waysides, waste ground and also near human habitation - it was once planted in gardens, and in certain areas of the country it was 'farmed' as it were. It generally grows on sandy or clayey soils.

Growing to about 15 or 20ft sometimes, the leaves are pinnate, compound and in opposite pairs (2, 3 or 4) with ovate-lanceolate leaflets, serrated, and with a terminal lobe. The strong-scented flowers, which bloom around June, are creamy-white and formed into flat-topped clusters. These flowers eventually give rise to purple-black berries which are used in conserves and wine-making. Flowers are used to make a lightly alcoholic drink, and in the old days the straight green early stems were pickled. I also came across just one reference in an early 19th century book to the clustered elder flowers bunches being used instead of cauliflower heads in an ‘English Piccalilli’ recipe.

GORSE / FURZE - *Ulex europaeus*

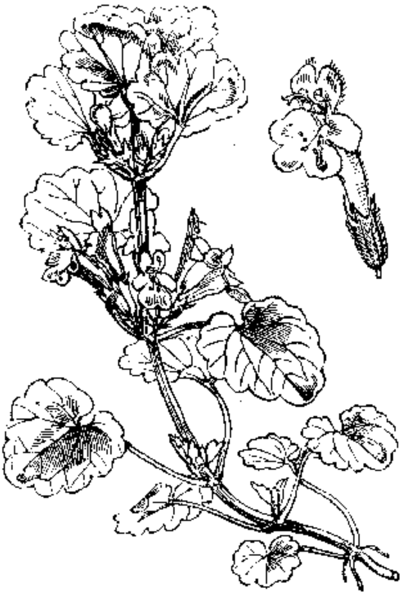


Gorse is found in every part of Britain though less towards the northerly parts, and is associated with dry heath-like habitats - particularly where there has been no cultivation for some time - and likes sandy and sand-loam soils best.

This evergreen species can grow to about 6ft high, and has a dense shrub form, and can overwhelm ground level plant communities if it is not kept under control. The spiny, lanceolate, leaves are closely packed on their hairy branches.

Flowering from roughly April to August or later (depending on seasonal climate shifts), the golden-yellow flowers have a keel and two wings very much like other members of the pea family to which this species also belongs. When they are fully blown, warmed by the spring sun, the flowers have an almost coconut-apricot smell and consequently these are sometimes used for making gorse wine, a tea-like beverage, and also put into gorse flower and honey ice-cream.

GROUND IVY - *Glechoma hederacea*

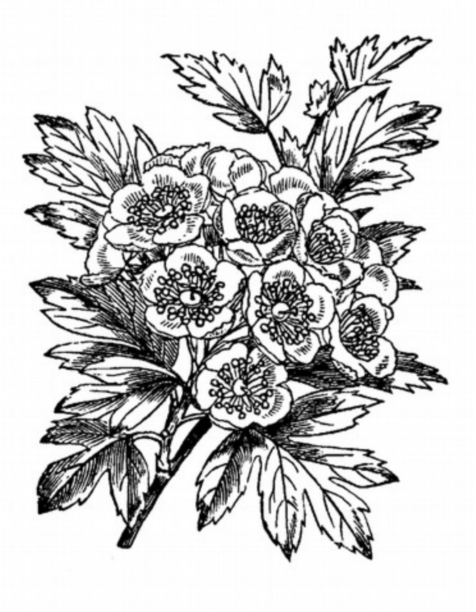


This perennial hedgerow species, belonging to the mint family, is largely found throughout Britain and much of northern temperate Europe. It prefers soils which are partly sandy, but will also grow in clayey soils, its trailing stems sprawling down sloping banks and at the bottom of hedges, but preferring an open habitat (it struggles to survive when large engulfing species dominate) as it only grows about 4 or 5 inches tall (9 to 10 inches when flowering).

The square, branching, slightly hairy procumbent stems are slender, and give rise to scalloped, kidney-shaped leaves set opposite on leaf stalks. The colour of the leaves is quite variable, frequently having a reddish-purple tinge when in fully exposed habitats without shelter from the sun, to shiny dark green where the plant grows in shade. Ground-ivy generally has bluish-violet flowers.

The rather bitter but aromatic leaves may be dried as a tea/beverage, or used fresh in a leaf infusion, and may be added stuffing, soups or stews. The plant was a key medicinal herb in remedies for coughs and similar.

HAWTHORN - *Crataegus rhipidophylla* syn. *Crataegus oxyacantha*

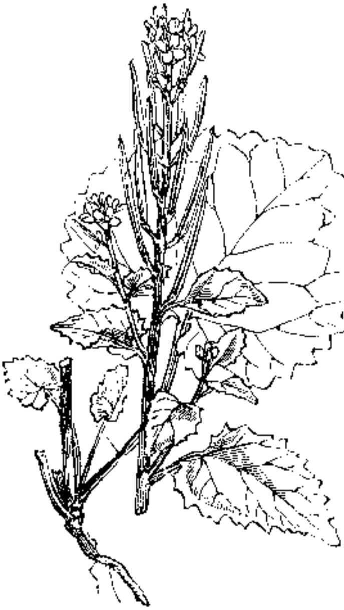


Hawthorn is essentially found in most parts of the British Isles, growing into a tree where it is left unmolested or undisturbed (generally it is a hedging species) and can reach 15 to 30ft in height. It generally likes a sandy or sand-humus soil, the latter developing over the years through its own decaying leaves.

The stalked leaves are deeply cleft, lobed and toothed, is hairless and of a dark, almost glossy, green when mature. The flowers are white or pink with 5 distinct petals, and scented, and give rise to the 'haw' or fruit in the autumn. These contain a large seed surrounded by a thin layer of slightly sweet dry pulp, and vary in colour from a scarlet to an almost purple-crimson colour in some specimens.

The very young pale green leaf buds may be added to salads, while the berries sometimes find their way into hedgerow conserves. However, be cautious in your use of the berries and leaves as some people react badly to them, so it is wise to do a tolerance test before you start to consume them. Historically, *Crataegus* has been an ingredient in herbal remedies.

HEDGE GARLIC / GARLIC MUSTARD - *Alliaria petiolata*



Although it bears the 'garlic' name this species is not related to the onion family, but to the *Cruciferae* or the cabbage family. When crushed or bruised has a slight garlicky smell but not as strong as ramsons (the plant most frequently referred to as ‘wild garlic’).

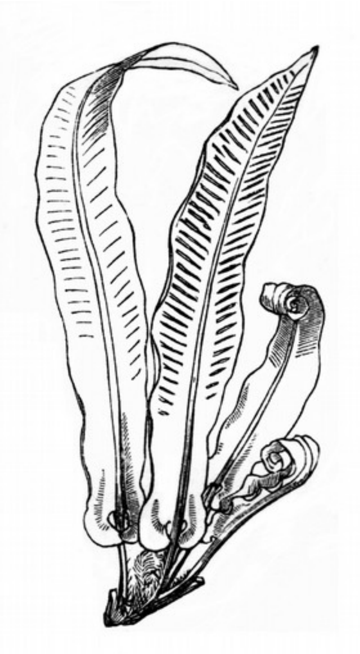
Habitats with some shade and ground moisture provide the best situations for this plant to thrive, though it likes a humus or humus-sand soil.

It is a tall, upright, biennial plant with a rosette of heart-shaped, toothed, leaves forming in the first year, and then producing a flower stalk up to 3ft in height in the second year, the leaves of which are more pointed (almost having the appearance of a nettle leaf). The small, white, flowers have four petals formed into a cross shape. These eventually give rise to long, slightly curving, seed pods.

Young leaves are added to salads while older ones are cooked - though heating them tends to diminish the slight garlicky smell and flavour. The flower buds are usable in salads, while the seeds provide a mustardy zing and can be ground into a hot paste. You will need lots.

HART’S-TONGUE FERN

Asplenium scolopendrium syn. *Scolopendrium vulgare*

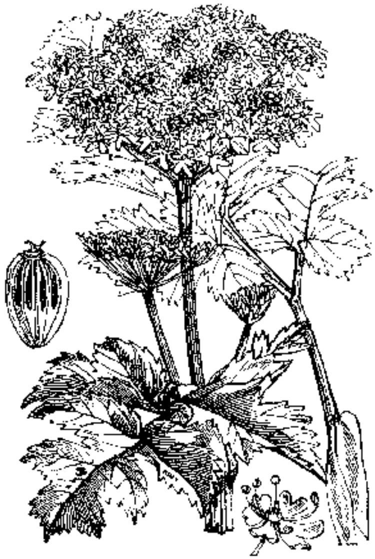


This fern with its long, tapering, fronds is very common in the south west, and although once eaten as a foodstuff (more as medicinal cuisine it would appear) I would recommend that it is left strictly as an emergency food only and not used as an everyday vegetable. Various ferns have suspect qualities and constituents and this species is in the same overall family. It’s locally common on shady banks, rocky areas and walls.

When young the bright green leaves are very soft and supple, and are somewhat astringent to the taste. As they age the leaves become darker and tougher, and when mature develop *sori* (that produce spores) on the leaf undersides.

The shiny leaves, which can be anything from 6 to 12+ inches long, are generally found in tufts; the shape being linear and narrow, although the base where the leaf joins the stem is cordate.

HOGWEED - *Heracleum sphondylium*



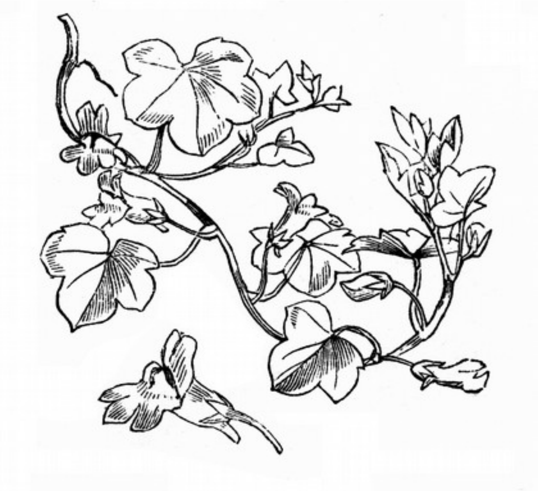
Hogweed is another member of the *Umbellifer* family so it is important that this plant is identified properly. It is found throughout Britain and is a common weed of waysides, waste ground and hedgerows, but tends to prefer habitats which have some shelter, good light, available moisture and a loamy soil.

The plant can grow quite tall (to 10 ft) but generally ranges from about 4 to 6ft, has a hollow, furrowed, generally hairy stem and is biennial or perennial. The leaves are large, triangular, with lobes on either side of a common stalk/midrib, much divided, usually into 5 segments, and have acute serrations. The leaf shape can vary quite considerably - from quite chunk oblong forms to some that almost look like cannabis leaves, having almost finger-like leaflets. When crushed the leaves have a rather unpleasant smell. The flowers which appear around May to June (although specimens do flower in November / December if the situation and seasons are clement), are borne on a generally flat umbel, are quite large, and of a white or white-pink colour.

Although the young spring leaf shoots may be eaten cooked (they look a little like a downy asparagus as they emerge from the root) a note of caution needs to be uttered. Hogweed sap can blister sensitive skin, particularly in sunlight. So do be very cautious if you decide to try.

IVY-LEAVED TOADFLAX

Cymbalaria muralis syn. *Linaria cymbalaria*



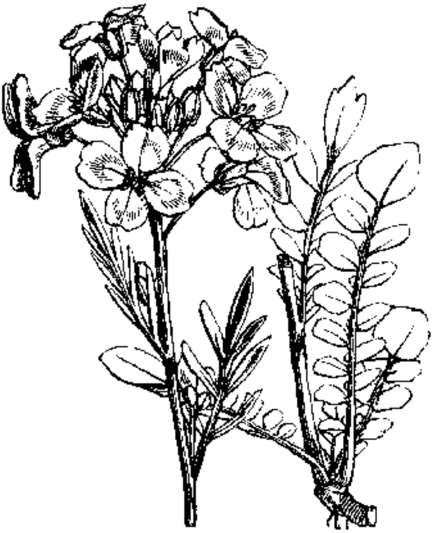
This is an introduced perennial plant not a British native, having been brought into the country as a potential salad ingredient back in times past.

ILT is a low-lying plant and frequently found growing in walls and terraces; its limp, trailing, stems (which can grow a couple of feet long) hanging down from fissures among the stonework.

The ivy-shaped leaves are borne on stalks from the main stems, while the light purple-blue flowers (flowering between May till November) are also borne on stalks, and have two rather distinctive pale yellow dots in the centre.

From experience, in open habitats with large amounts of available sunshine the leaves tend to be tinged with purple, and are bitter. Where leaves can grow in shade they remain a vibrant green, are larger, and are not at all bitter. What bitterness there is could be masked with a salad dressing.

LADY'S SMOCK - *Cardamine pratensis*



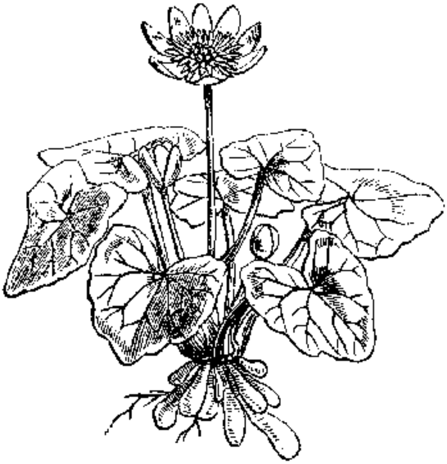
This is a well-known perennial plant throughout Britain, and is to be found in water-meadows, by streams, true marsh land and rivers.

Cuckoo Flower or Bittercress, as the plant is also sometimes known, has a rosette habit, and grows from about 1 to 2ft in height. The leaves are pinnate, the leaves arranged each side of each side of a common stalk, and having a singular end lobe. The base leaves have small leaflets rather round and somewhat angular, and are stalked, while the leaves of the flower stalk are more or less stalkless and nearly lance-shaped.

The flowers are quite large and conspicuous lilac-to-white in colour, and usually appear somewhere around April to June.

The young leaves are used as a salad or cooked and are peppery, with a warm after-tone. The flowers and flower buds may also be used, and are less peppery. Cooking, as with most cress-type leaves, kills the peppery taste.

LESSER CELANDINE - *Ficaria verna* syn. *Ranunculus ficaria*



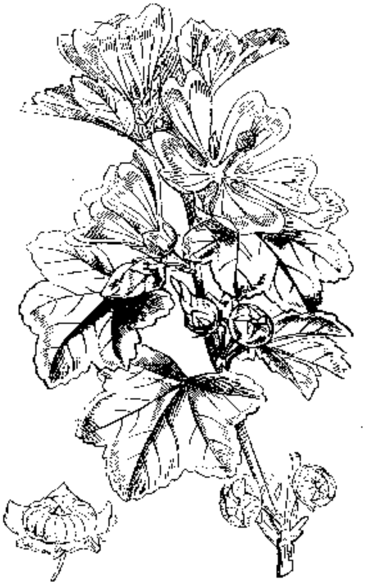
Grows throughout the UK. Found down in the damp hollows of clayey ash woods, or moist open meadows and fields, and under hedges carpeting the bank to the exclusion of everything else. It is a clay-loving plant, requiring a clay soil.

The plant has a loose rosette habit, grows about six inches high, is hairless, has small tubers which are club-shaped and fleshy. The leaves are chiefly radical, heart-shaped, thick, smooth, shining, dark green with mottling (generally), with the leaf edge wavy or scalloped.

The flowers are large, shining yellow golden, and about an inch in diameter. Petals usually eight in number, but can vary. Generally flowers from March to May, and is perennial.

Lesser Celandine is a member of the buttercup family which are generally toxic to humans and have an acrid taste. However, the young leaves of this plant may be consumed cooked, as may be the tiny fleshy roots which have an almost starchy texture when cooked. Given the family background of this plant it's probably wise to consume the greens in small quantities (mixed with other greens) and not too often.

COMMON MALLOW - *Malva sylvestris*



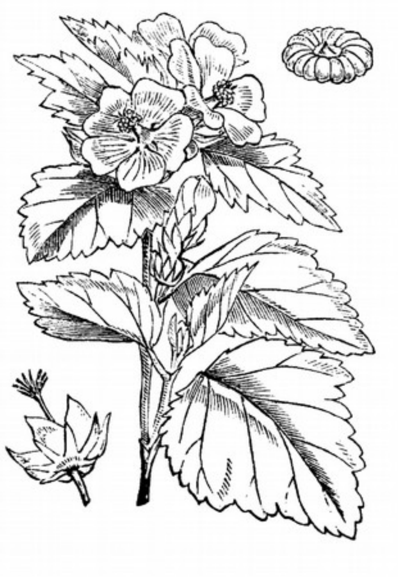
The common mallow is sometimes perennial and sometimes biennial (although I have personally had one under cultivation which flowered and died within one year – which made it an annual).

This species is found in waste places, along roadsides, and a weed of cultivation near villages.

Growing to about 2 to 4 ft. high common mallow is a tall, erect, species developing woody flowering stems as it ages. The scalloped-edged, stalked, leaves are palmate (almost geranium-like in their shape), the lower ones having 5 to 7 shallow lobes radiating from a common centre. The flowers are a characteristic reddish-purple to deep pink, and quite large.

The young leaves of the common mallow may be cooked while the immature, green, seed pod clusters ('cheeses') may be nibbled raw or added to salads, although they are tasteless and small.

MARSH MALLOW - *Althaea officinalis*

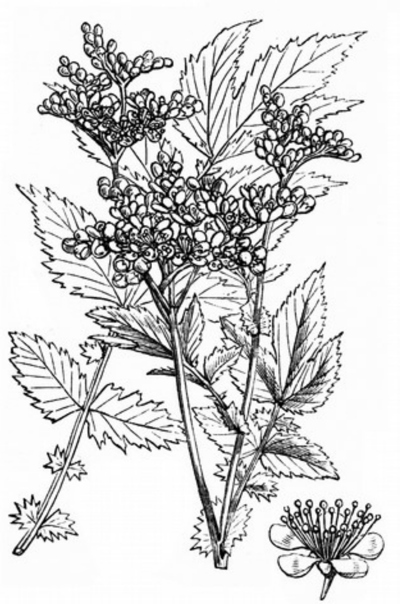


Marsh Mallow is an erect, perennial, species frequently found in marshy areas near the coast or estuarine related land. The leaves are softly downy on both sides, almost velvety to the touch, and have 3-5 lobes, while the main flowering stems are also slightly downy but not to quite the same extent as the leaves. The leaves are also serrated or toothed.

Reaching anything from 2 to 5ft high marsh mallow produces flowers around August-September which are pale pink-lilac to an almost white colour. The seed pods appear like small cheeses.

The young leaves may be cooked and the immature seed pods raw or cooked.

MEADOWSWEET - *Filipendula ulmaria*

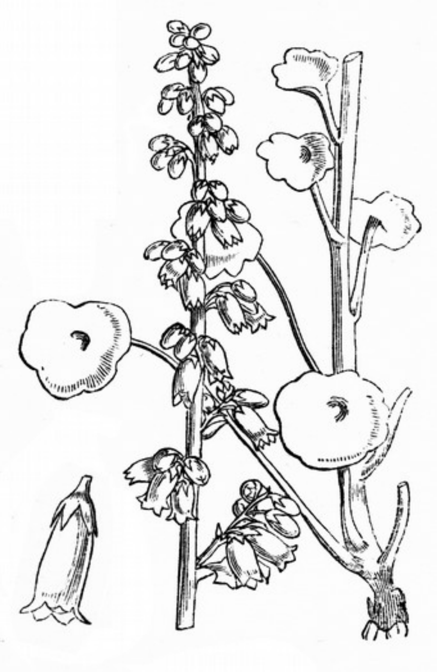


Found across most of Britain and much of northern European temperate climes, meadowsweet is a common riverside flower, fond of damp places, and growing in damp hollows in moist meadows but also in moist roadside ditches. You might find it growing alongside marsh thistle, and various kinds of rushes and sedges. The plant is more or less a clay-lover but can also be found in well saturated sandy loams.

Perennial meadowsweet has an erect habit (growing about 2 to 3ft high), and is tufted, with the stems being furrowed and angular. The leaves are pinnate, with lobes each side of a common stalk, white-felted below or hairless, toothed, with large toothed leaflets and smaller intermediate ones. The flower clusters are creamy white, sweet scented, the small petals rounded. Flowering time can be from May to October.

Meadowsweet is not really used as a culinary ingredient as such (the plant is better known in herbal remedies), though a tisane may be made with clusters of the newly open flowers in hot water, and a syrup made in a similar way to Elder flower syrup. One of the chefs I worked with in the past served up stewed apricots with the syrup as a breakfast dish.

NAVELWORT / PENNYWORT - *Umbilicus rupestris*



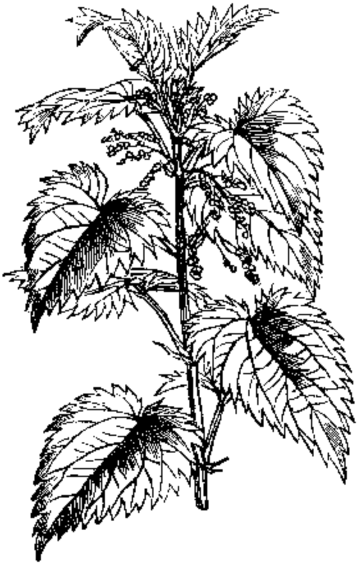
When in flowerbud-mode navelwort has a sort of primeval feel about it. It is generally found in moist walls or fissured rock formations (favouring acid soils not calcerous). Frequently it will be found growing alongside ferns. It's rarely found in typical country shrubby hedgerows.

The plant gets its name from the succulent, thick, dimpled leaves which are borne singly on similarly succulent stems that come from the radical root. These leaves generally don't grow more than about 5 or 6 inches long, with the leaf edges being scalloped, and the surface smooth and shiny.

The flowers stalks can reach about 1ft in length, with their drooping, cylindrical, flowers being greenish-yellow and clustered on a raceme or flower spike.

The leaves may be cooked (but they go rather flabby) and are better as a salad ingredient where their succulent moist leaves add a texture but not particularly much taste. Older leaves have a bitter tang. The leaves are, incidentally, diuretic.

COMMON STINGING NETTLE - *Urtica dioica*



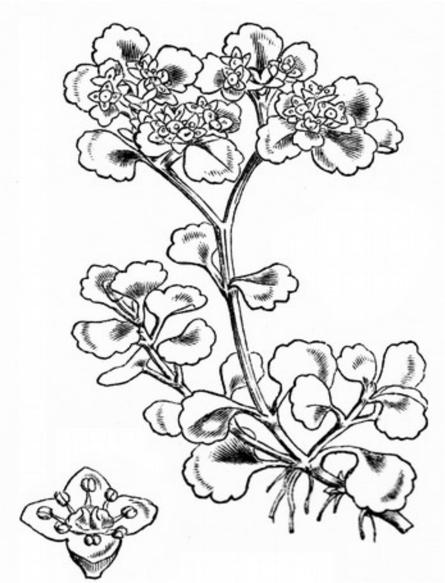
This species needs little introduction and is found throughout Britain and northern temperate Europe. It's a plant that does best in a nitrogen-rich soil, but will also be found on waste ground with sandy-loam soils.

The creeping, fibrous, root-stock makes this plant a potential menace for those trying to keep it under control. The whole plant (except the very youngest new spring growth) is covered with stinging hairs (containing formic acid - the compound behind the tingling sensation). The leaves are roughly heart-shaped with deep serrations and set in opposite pairs on the stalks and stems. Individually the flowers are insignificant but are formed in hanging tassel-like clusters which makes them more obvious.

The leaves of this plant make an excellent cooked vegetable when young and fresh green, and are high in vitamins, and make a good spinach substitute with alterations to the cooking method. Try them in a nettle pesto with Ramsons / *Allium ursinum* as the garlic component. For everything you need to know about cooking nettles check out my nettle cookbook for inspiration – Cooking with Nettles: 101+ Ways. ISBN 978-0-244-94164-2

OPPOSITE-LEAVED GOLDEN SAXIFRAGE

Chrysosplenium oppositifolium

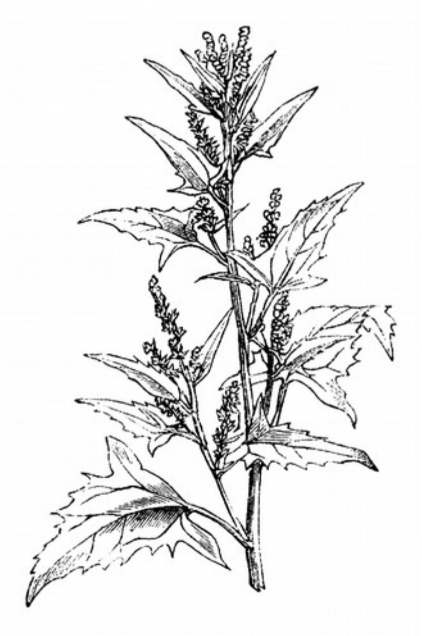


This is a herbaceous perennial water-loving plant which grows where there is clean moving water (usually) and is frequently found growing in carpets. It has a quite leafy, branched and creeping stem with coarsely toothed small leaves. These leaves are almost round and are placed opposite each other on the stem. Around May-July the plant bears tiny yellow flowers which give carpeted areas of this plant an almost yellow blanket like appearance, though the plant only grows about 2 to 4 inches high.

My suggestion is that OLGS is always cooked or steamed where it has been picked in habitats where livestock may be present, rather than use it as a purely salad ingredient.

Before harvesting a whole lot of OLGS I would suggest doing a taste-test nibble to check the bitterness level. I do this routinely since I have found colonies which have been growing in similar haunts but have wildly varying taste. I don't know if it is something to do with excess sunlight or nutrient uptake from the soil and the plant's conversion of them.

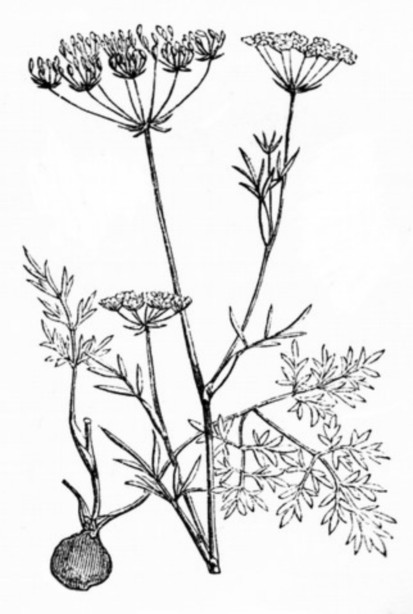
ORACHE - *Atriplex patula*



Annual orache is found both by the coast and on cultivated ground, waste places, dunghills and the like, and is of a deep mealy green (though coastal specimens appear to have more fleshy leaves and be less mealy). It is an upright plant growing from about 1 to 3ft tall, with stems which are striped with red, and are also branched. The lower leaves are opposite, triangular and hastate. The flowers are rather non-descript but they give rise to rather distinctive toothed, triangular seeds pods.

Orache is one of a number of related species, and the leaves of this particular one make a very good cooked vegetable item similar to spinach. Towards coastal areas the leaf material seems to take on a salty taste from the surrounding saline conditions.

PIGNUT - *Bunium bulbocastanum*



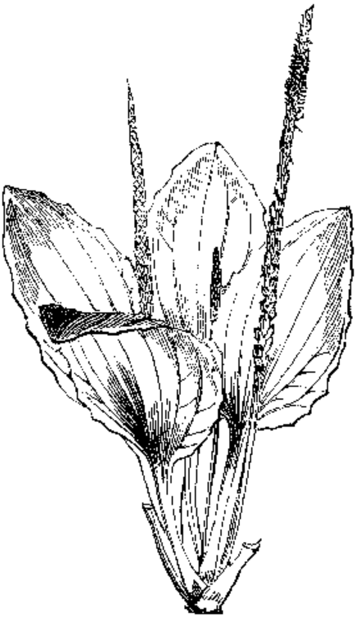
Sometimes called the Earthnut in past times this perennial species produces an edible, though small, tuber. [Remember that you need permission to dig up any wild plant species that is not on your own land.]

This is one of the *Umbellifer* family so if you cannot identify it with absolute certainty leave it well alone. Well informed foragers don't take risks with unknown plants.

The early base leaf growth which appears in spring almost look carrot-like. As the plant begins to flower these lower leaves start of die back. The leaves on the flowering stem have an almost dill-like appearance, being quite feathery.

The root has a dark brown skin which can generally be rubbed off between your fingers and makes an interesting and tasty food item. They can be boiled or baked, even used raw, though stir-frying allows both a crispness and good taste. However, this is not an over-abundant species so limit yourself to trying one and just once… unless you start growing it in the garden as writers in the mid-19th century suggested.

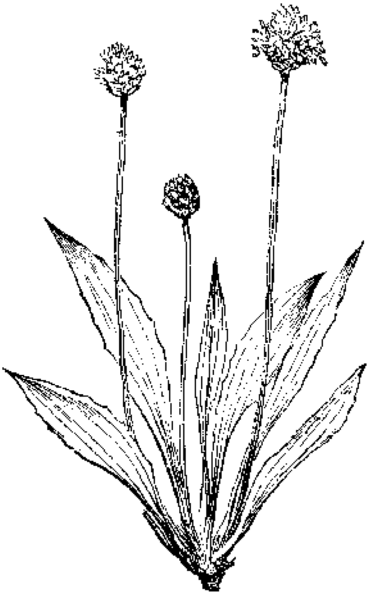
PLANTAIN, GREATER - *Plantago major*



This perennial plant will be found along footpaths and waysides, on waste ground and in pasture, and has a rosette habit with radical leaves. Those leaves are oblong-ovate, generally slightly hairy, have broad, channeled, stalks that carry 3 to 7 thick fibrous strands which appear as ribs on the underside of the leaf. The flowers are in long, slender, spikes, and formed on stalks anything from 2 to 9 inches high.

The very young springtime leaves of greater plantain make a quite reasonable cooked vegetable green, but become tough and bitter as they age. Not a great wild vegetable, but infinitely improved with lashings of Thai sweet chilli sauce.

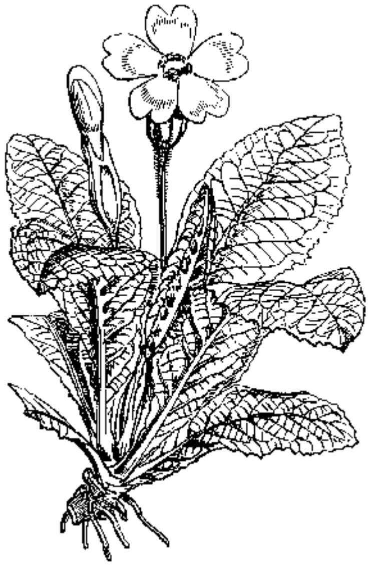
PLANTAIN, RIBWORT - *Plantago lanceolata*



This species inhabits grassy places, pasture, cornfield margins and waste ground, and does appear to have an affinity for ground which has more moisture. Although the leaves have a rosette habit, the plant has erect leaves and flowering stalks. The long, lance-shaped leaves have 5 distinctive ribs and the flowering spike is generally short (when compared to Greater Plantain / *Plantago major*). Height-wise ribwort can be anything from a few inches tall to over 1ft when in flower.

The very young, tender, leaves in the winter-spring period can be used as a reasonable food ingredient. Amazingly the newly formed, but unopened flower bud clusters have a mushroom flavour – which can be extracted and made use of. Tough luck if you don't like mushrooms, but it might be worth playing with if it is the texture of mushrooms that is found unpleasant rather than the taste.

PRIMROSE - *Primula vulgaris*

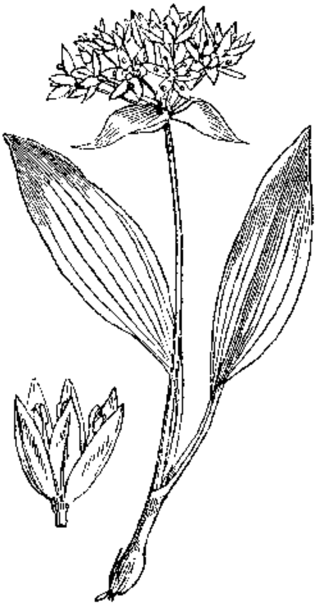


One of those quintessential spring flowers, and found throughout Europe and most parts of Britain (although it is a protected species in Northern Ireland). It is a plant that loves a humus soil but also likes clay soils.

The highly wrinkly leaves are ob-ovate and taper down to the base so that they appear to have virtually no stem and spring straight from the root-stock itself, forming a rosette habit. Blooming from around March to May the sulphur-yellow flowers are borne on short, slightly downy, stalks having one flower only. Generally the flowering plant is about six inches high, although experience shows that some individual leaves can reach about 6 or 7 inches in length.

Although the young leaves may be eaten some caution is advised as the primula family can be highly allergenic. So it is important to run through the tolerance test routine before attempting to eat the leaves as a food ingredient. Leaves that are old have a bitterness that isn't pleasant. More of a herbal remedy plant in my view, than comestible, so probably mix the leaves with other wild greens. A few of the yellow flowers can be added to salads.

RAMSONS / BEAR'S GARLIC - *Allium ursinum*



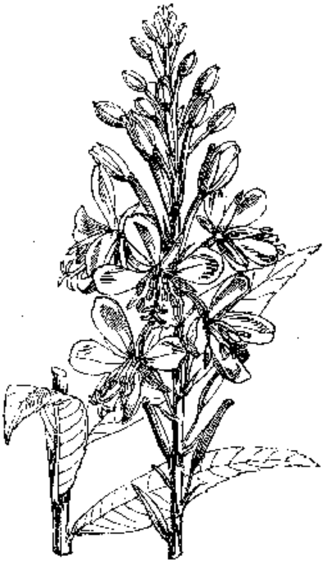
This is the plant which people generally refer to as 'wild garlic' though there are other species which also are called that. Ramsons is found throughout northern temperate regions of Europe, but it tends to form localized colonies rather than being generally widespread. It grows in damp woods and copses, and lanes where there is a reasonable amount of cover from hedges or tree canopy. That said, ramsons can also exist out in 'the open' as some small localized colonies in Cornwall show, though this is not generally the case in my experience.

The smooth, flat, bright green, spear-shaped leaves spring directly from a perennial elliptical bulb. The white flowers clusters are borne on stalks that are very nearly triangular in cross-section, having six sharply pointed petals in a star-like formation. When in flower ramsons reaches a height of about 1ft. All parts of the plant may be used at some time during the life-cycle, although it must be remembered that you need permission to dig up the bulbs, and in a way that is self-defeating since you will be denying yourself use of the upper foliage.

There is one plant which has leaves that look very similar to ramsons and that is Lily-of-the-Valley / *Convallaria majalis*. However, the leaves of that species do not smell of garlic when crushed.

ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB

Chamerion angustifolium syn. Epilobium angustifolium

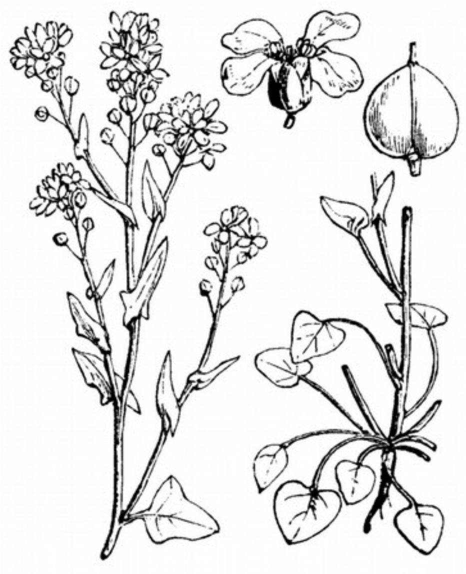


Rosebay is a woodland and wasteland plant, also being found in field borders and neglected corners of gardens which have run to a wild state. It does prefer, however, soils that are stony, gravelly or sandy, and is frequently found in upland areas, and also where a habitat or terrain is banked up.

The species has tall, erect, stems (3 to 5ft high) bearing long, narrow, lance-shaped smooth leaves that are pale green and soft when young but stiffer and darker green when older. The leaves are placed alternately along the downy stems, have a white midrib, a whitish leaf underside and are lightly toothed. The quite large flowers, which appear around July-August, are in the form of a spike, individual pinky-purple flowers having four petals.

Although the young leaves of this species are edible cooked some caution is advised as some folks react to the plant. It is advised that the leaves are boiled and the cooking water discarded, rather than the leaves added to other ingredients in a recipe in an unprepared state.

SCURVY-GRASS - *Cochlearia officinalis*



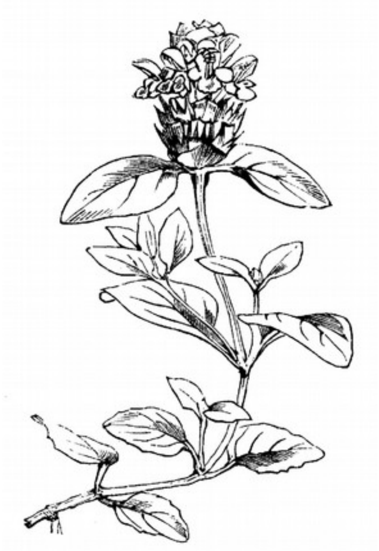
Scurvy-grass is an annual or biennial species of coastal and estuarine habitats, found on cliff faces, rocky outcrops, sandy soils and muddy seashores.

The species varies much in the size and shape of the fleshy, spoon-shaped leaves, the whole plant varying in height from around 4 to 10 inches tall.

Lower, base, leaves are more kidney-shaped and stalked, while those of the flowering stem are stalkless, wavy, angular and clasp the stem. The small white flowers can vary in size too, and are in clusters.

The leaves of scurvy-grass have a peppery, horse-radish-like, punch and are quite reasonable as a hot salad leaf when YOUNG. Older leaves develop a dreadful phenolic like smell and taste, and are quite revolting. Scurvy-grass was the go-to anti-scorbutic remedy from the 16th century onwards in Europe, prior to the arrival of oranges, lemons and limes.

SELF-HEAL - *Prunella vulgaris*



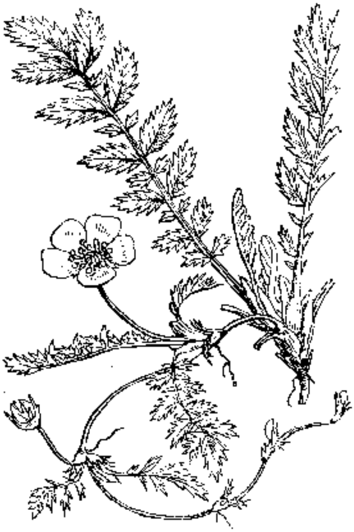
Self-heal is a perennial species which is mostly found in meadows, pasture and lawns, particularly where there is moisture.

It has a creeping root system, and may be variously upright or prostrate in its habit. And although it may reach 10 to 12 inches in height, it frequently may be found only a few inches tall.

While the upper stem leaves are virtually stalkless, the lower ones are stalked. All leaves are ovate to egg-shaped, set opposite each other, and frequently the leaf edge has a few ill-defined teeth. The plant is more or less hairy. The small purple flowers form in cylindrical whorls or spikes, with two leaves at the base.

Young leaves do not taste too bad if cooked and are added to soups and stews. As this plant was once used as a medicinal wound-herb it is probably best to mix a few leaves with other wild leaf greens rather than eat them as a main vegetable item.

SILVERWEED - *Potentilla anserina*

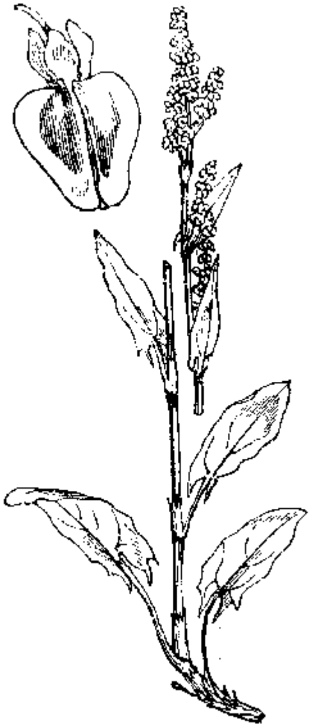


Silverweed is found along roadsides, waysides, damp pasture and the entrances to old field systems. It is a perennial with a slender, branching, creeping root-stock. The leaves are silky to the touch, are interruptedly pinnate, generally green on top and a silvery green underneath (though a variety exists that is silvery green on both the upper and lower sides). Individual leaflets are oblong, alternate and deeply serrated/toothed.

Flowering from June to August silverweed has quite large, solitary, yellow-petalled flowers on solitary stalks. The petals are not waxy like those of buttercup but more satin-matt. The plant can grow from anything from a few inches to 12 inches high in optimum conditions.

The pale, straggly, roots of this plant were once used as a foodstuff, it is said mainly in times of famine. The plant's astringent nature also found use in herbal remedies.

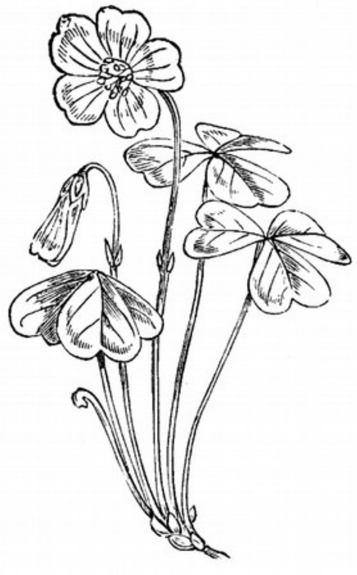
SORREL, COMMON - *Rumex acetosa*



Growing about 1 to 2ft tall this perennial plant is generally found in meadows and pasture, woodland margins, banks of hedges and grass verges. The lower base leaves are arrow-shaped on long stalks, having two 'ears' which face backwards towards the leaf stalks (the plant must not be confused with Cuckoopint / Lords and Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) which has similarly looking leaves when in its young state - if in doubt walk on). In the early part of growth the leaves are a fresh green with little shine. However, the leaves of older specimens can develop a shiny surface and become quite a dark green colour. The flowering stem has narrower arrow-like leaves.

Sorrel leaves have a nice acid-like taste (oxalic acid) and may be cooked or used raw in salads. Don't consume in large quantity or too often, or if you suffer from gout or other arthritic-type medical condition. I call this my vegetable rhubarb plant.

SORREL, WOOD - *Oxalis acetosella*

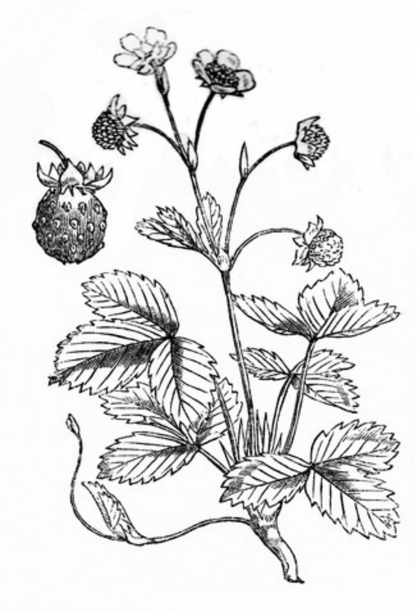


Perennial wood sorrel is found in many, but not all, parts of Britain. It is a small, shade-loving plant and therefore survives only where it's not dominated by larger undergrowth species but where there is adequate shade. A humus-based soil is best for wood sorrel although it also likes clay soils.

Growing to about 3 or 4 inches high wood sorrel has distinctive ternate leaves, that is divided into three, and consist of three hairy, stalked leaflets. Generally blooming around April and May the delicate white flowers (occasionally slightly pale lilac coloured). In fact there are two forms of wood sorrel but for the purposes of foraging the details are not important.

Wood sorrel foliage has an acid taste somewhat like apple peel, and is not quite so rhubarby-gooseberry-like as the true common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*). These small leaves make a nice little addition to salads as an 'accent' but generally the plant is too small and fiddly to make a significant contribution as a vegetable item. There's a garden lookalike with yellow flowers – *O. corniculata* – which can substitute.

WILD STRAWBERRY - *Fragaria vesca*

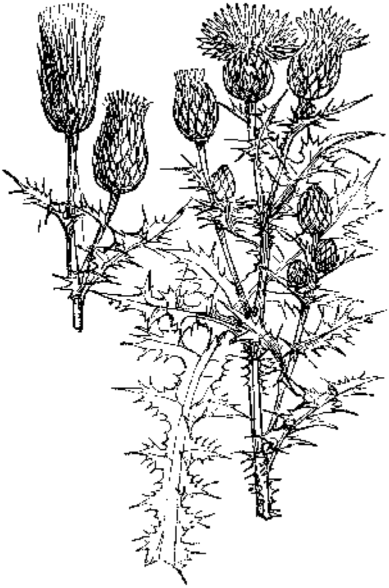


This is the much smaller form of the domesticated garden strawberry and is a shade-loving plant, frequently found on hedge banks, woodland and bushy pastures where it can keep in the shade, though have regular and sufficient light as well as moisture. It rarely is more than 6 to 8 inches tall.

One of the tastiest foraged foods around, but small return for the effort of picking.

Be sure not to confuse *F. vesca* with the Barren Strawberry / *Potentilla sterilis* which, as the name suggests, does not produce red strawberry fruits. The plants sometimes grow in the same habitats side-by-side but in my experience the real strawberry plant has slightly more yellow-green leaves, and the barren namesake more blue-green ones.

THISTLE, FIELD / CREEPING - *Cirsium arvense*

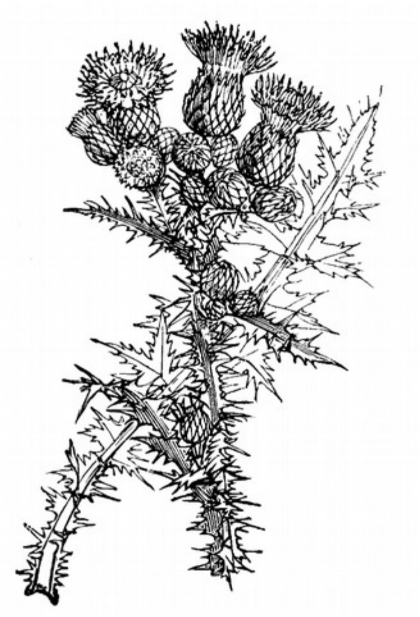


This is a troublesome perennial weed for landowners and is found in fields, beside roads and in waste ground. It has a creeping root and has an upright posture (being anything from about 1 to 4ft high), the stems being generally smooth (nearly all the other native/indigenous thistles in Britain have spined or prickly stems). The leaves are lance-shaped, very heavily divided, and have virtually no leaf stalk. The purple to purple-white flowers are on short flower-stalks and in clusters

The leaves aren't worth bothering with because of all the prickles which would need to be removed before processing. However, if the stem is stripped of the leaves and any stray spines, then it can be cooked. The root also may be cooked when the plant is young. To be perfectly honest this isn't one of the better edible wild greens, but improves with lashings of flavoured sauces.

In pure survival terms, this and the other two thistles in this aide-memoire can keep you alive for a considerable time, although you might become rather bored with an Eyore diet.

THISTLE, MARSH - *Cirsium palustre*

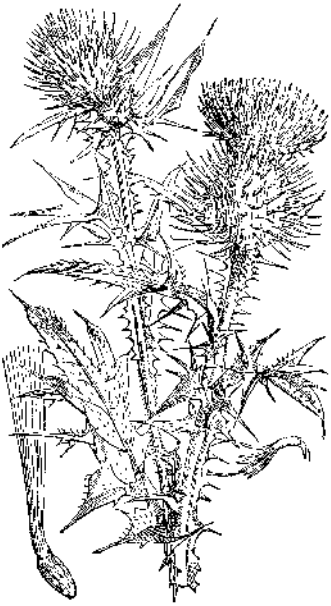


Marsh thistle is found throughout Britain and common where there is wet ground, growing in damp hollows in meadows and along the margins of lakes, rivers, and pools / ponds of all types and moist woodland.

A very tall plant (in optimum conditions it can reach 5 or 6ft high, even taller sometimes) marsh thistle has tufted heads of violet-purple flowers, the main stem branching at the top. It usually has one main stem, which is green and purple and winged with spinous rudimentary leaves. The main leaves are very prickly, with a pale-green midrib, the leaf spines often purple at the base. The flowers appear in summer, generally from June / July onwards till about September / October.

There's no use in trying to eat the leaves or flower buds of this plant, however the main stalk (when young & before the flower buds appear) forms a very pleasant cooked vegetable green once stripped of the spines and then the outer skin.

THISTLE, SPEAR - *Cirsium vulgare* (ex. *lanceolatus*)



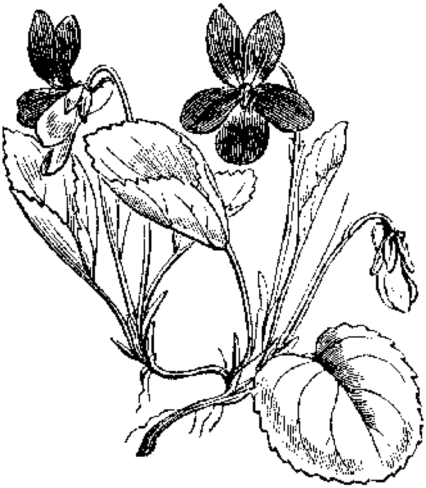
Universally common in Britain, spear thistle is also found across northern temperate Europe. It is found on waste ground near human habitation, but generally dispersed in fields and meadows, pastures, hillsides, and grass verges alongside other thistle species. It grows to about 3 or 4ft high.

Spear thistle is more or less a clay-loving plant growing on a clay soil, but will also be found on sand soil or sandy loam.

In winter the species retreats to a leaf rosette, but when fully grown develops into a tall, stout and erect plant. The stem is erect, hairy, furrowed and bears wings which are strongly spined, the spines being generally yellowish in colour. The leaves are lance-shaped, and have a distinct end lobe from which the plant derives its name. Deeply divided - nearly to the base - the leaves are cottony white (as is the main stem). The purple flower heads are borne on short stalks, and are grouped.

Various parts of the plant may be used as food: stripped down young stems, de-veined leaf midribs, slowly simmered roots – all improved with flavours.

VIOLET, DOG - *Viola riviniana*

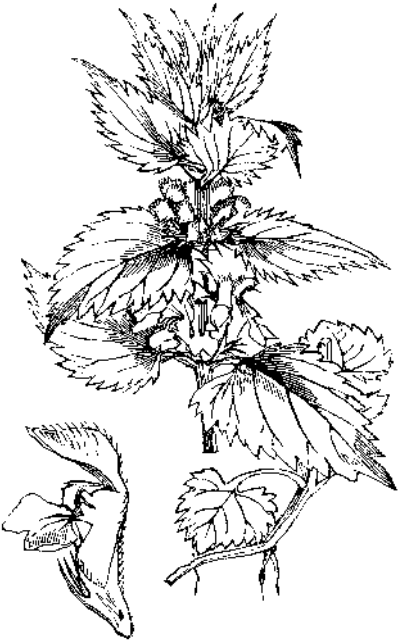


This perennial, low-lying plant which grows about 4 to 6 inches high is found in woodland areas, hedge banks, thickets and heaths. The stalked, heart-shaped, leaves have a rosette habit from the perennial root-stock

The unscented, bluish-purple to lilac coloured flowers have oval-Oblong petals, the lowest one broadly oval with dark veins at the base.

The young leaves and flowers of the dog violet may be used as a food ingredient, though the flowers do not really serve any purpose other than adding colour to a salad. The young leaves, however, are quite nutritious and may be added to other vegetable ingredients in soups, salads and so on, though potentially not as a single main ingredient on their own as they were cautioned in old herbal texts.

WHITE DEAD-NETTLE - *Lamium album*



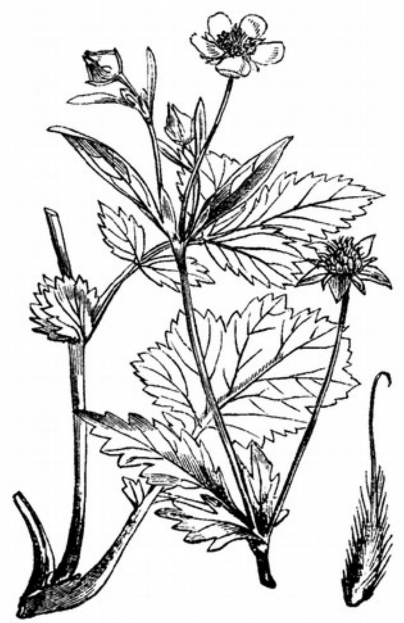
This perennial species is found throughout northern temperate Europe and Britain, though rather localized in Scotland and Ireland.

The leaves of this plant resemble the common stinging nettle, and the two often can be found growing together on waste ground or cultivated land. Frequently it's found in hedge banks, and particularly likes clayey soils but will also be found in sandy soil.

With a creeping root system, perennial white dead-nettle has square flower stems heart-shaped to egg-shaped stalked leaves which end in a point. Lower leaves are long-stalked, the leaf edges generally being coarsely toothed. The leaves are a more blue-green while those of young to middle-age nettle leaves are more yellow-green.

Standing about 1ft in height white dead-nettle flowers are formed in whorls (ie. forming a ring or circle) around the main square stem. The dried flowers were apparently were apparently used as a tea or beverage. Like the common stinging nettle, the leaves may be cooked an eaten, although they do smell when crushed.

WOOD AVENS - *Geum urbanum*

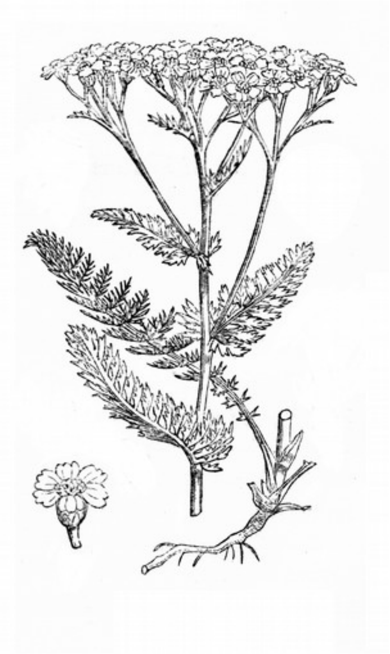


To be perfectly honest wood avens isn't a particularly handy wild food ingredient. In the past the spindly roots were used for their clove-like flavour, both in food and for flavouring wine, but cloves from a supermarket are far more handy. However, in the next zombie apocalypse this is the go-to plant for clove flavour. Very young leaves may be used as an additional vegetable ingredient in pottages and similar, but they aren't great.

As the common name suggests this perennial species likes woodland, hedgerows and their banks, thickets, and shady habitats. Initially the plant has a rosette habit with the early stalked spring leaves coming from the root-stock. These base leaves are usually 3-lobed, two lobes on either side of a common stalk/midrib, with a terminal lobe and all scalloped.

Eventually the plant puts up an erect flowering stem (from 1 to 2ft high) the leaves of which are made up of three leaflets, and are highly variable. The small yellow flowers which appear around May to August have 5 petals and eventually give rise to a seed head, the individual seeds being hooked.

YARROW - *Achillea millefolium*



Found throughout northern temperate Europe and Britain, perennial yarrow is common in all sorts of habitats. It is to be found in fields and meadows, especially dry pastures, alongside roads and on waste ground, preferring a sandy soil (of many rock types), and growing on the margins of arable land, allotments, and gardens.

Physically yarrow leaves have thousands of delicate downy leaflets, and the plant grows from 1 to 2ft high, the stems erect, angular and woolly. The flowers - which can be anything from white to a lilac colour - are numerous, and borne in close terminal clusters. Generally the flowers are found between June and September. There are a number of garden ornamental varieties of yarrow, some of which have yellow flowers.

Although very young and tender leaves have been sprinkled in salads and cooked I don't think they should be trusted as a general vegetable since yarrow is regarded as a herbal remedy source.

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